William Rufus: myth and reality

Emma Mason

The commonly accepted view of the reign of William II (1087–1100) is a political myth, primarily the work of Eadmer, who depicted the king as the villain against whom St Anselm strove to impose the revolutionary Gregorian reform programme in England. Henry I, moreover, denigrated his brother’s regime as a cover for furthering William’s harsh but constructive policies. Eadmer’s writings were quarried by subsequent twelfth-century writers in the mainstream of the English monastic historical tradition, who added their own literary embellishments. Nineteenth-century historians uncritically accepted these accounts and Henry I’s gloss on the reign. They then contributed moral judgement of their own, which passed without qualification into modern secondary works.

This paper re-evaluates William II’s political and governmental achievements, and his ecclesiastical policy. His character is considered in the light of recent work on twelfth-century intellectual and psychological attitudes, and the accounts of more favourable chroniclers. It is concluded that the king developed his father’s strong policies in every direction with considerable success, making possible the more publicized but essentially imitation work of Henry I. William’s expansion and consolidation of national frontiers, his legal and financial developments, and his maintenance of royal control over the Church are revealed under the distortions of ecclesiastical and Henrician historiography.

The traditional view of King William II, probably the supreme achievement of myths-making in English history, is the more tenacious in that the primary sources for his reign were largely the products of the myth-makers themselves. The reputation of later ‘bad kings’ has been modified by reappraisal in recent years of royal records and chronicle sources, but the formal records of William II’s reign amount to little over two hundred writs and charters which have chanced to survive (Davis and Whitwell 1913: nos. 289–487), and Eadmer, the one strictly contemporary writer, was uniformly hostile. In William’s time the writing of contemporary history was a monastic monopoly, so that clerical interests were emphasised while those of the emergent secular state were largely ignored. Works extolling royal achievements were occasionally produced in the eleventh century and earlier, but not on the scale found from Henry II’s reign onwards (Gransden 1975:363–81). William did not, apparently, commission such a work, and his successor’s theoretical repudiation of his achievements precluded the writing of a posthumous official biography. Favourable accounts of William’s reign were produced, but in centres well away from the Anglo-Norman court. His achievements were considerable, but have been largely ignored owing to this bias in the most accessible sources.
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and the recent civil war in the Empire provided an example of the fate awaiting states in which one faction buttressed its interests while ostensibly championing the papal power.

The chroniclers’ designation of a ‘good king’ was governed by three criteria (Galbraith 1945: 124). First, he must be generous in his treatment of the clerical hierarchy, which William certainly was not—nowadays, we might think, with good reason, for the increasing power and wealth of clerical possessors brought no pastoral benefit to those who ultimately provided their income (Mason 1976: 21). The king’s own reasoning was strictly practical. Clerical baronies, as much as those of laymen, were subject to his overlordship, and since they gained by the stability of the realm, they must take their share of the cost. This brings us to the second criterion, that the king should be successful in war, which William was, even in the eyes of his strongest critics, but the chroniclers constantly bemoaned the funding which was essential if armies were to be put in the field. Even in the heyday of feudalism, kings depended to a considerable extent on mercenary forces, and William could afford the best, thanks to the financial developments of his reign, but the best could demand something over the going rate (Prestwich 1954: 26-7), and the exactions required to finance them caused much resentment. The king’s subjects were willing enough to share the benefits of his territorial gains, but less willing to help pay for the campaigns which made them possible. This double-think over the raising of war finance was not peculiar to William’s biographers. Throughout the medieval period and beyond, it was almost the biggest single cause of political crises, and unlike the majority of his successors, William was not forced into a showdown over it.

The third criterion of the chroniclers derived from their envisaging royal government as even more personal than it was. The king’s doings were largely recorded as a series of encounters with his magnates of Church and state, and there was as yet virtually no attempt to discern the underlying policies which led to particular clashes. Since each reign was depicted in these terms, the king’s personal morality was taken into account, at any rate by chroniclers who were already hostile for other reasons (Galbraith 1945: 122, 124). Received opinion on the character of such ‘bad kings’ easily originated in casual emotional judgements on the part of one or two writers who were subsequently copied, without acknowledgment, by chroniclers who were themselves accepted in turn as authoritative (Galbraith 1945: 125-6). When textbook invective against William II is followed up in the footnotes, it is seen that the charges brought against the king in person depend partly on Anselm’s insistence that church reform on his own terms was essential to improve the moral tone of the nation (Chibnall 1973: 179), and partly on the criticisms of the second generation of chroniclers that the younger courtiers in his time were no longer the austere warriors of the Conquest era, but instead wore long hair and trendy shoes (Stuubs 1889: 370; Chibnall 1973: 186-90). This is somewhat tenuous evidence for Freeman’s allegations against the king himself (1882b: 497). There is no positive evidence that the king was a homosexual (Brooke 1963: 162). His being unmarried at his death is not circumstantial proof of this.
since a. that period men of royal and baronial houses often postponed marriage until they were middle aged. Marriage was not a matter of personal inclination, out of dynastic significance, and could most profitably be negotiated when a man had reached the peak of his political strength. The same consideration influenced both the king's brothers. Chroniclers who were hostile to the king considered innuendo a legitimate weapon (Southern 1966:304). In contrast, the Welsh chronicle, the Brut y Tywysogion, which took a dispassionate view of life at the Anglo-Norman court, related that the king left no heir because he used concubines (Williams 1860:64–6).

The chroniclers who designated a king as good or bad were normally minor obediencyaries, often the librarians of their communities, rather than senior office-holders such as abbot or prior, whose work at least brought them up against the realities of royal government. Their distorted representation of the facts was not checked by those who copied them. It was at most slightly adapted in the course of time and the accidents of manuscript transmission, as popular feeling very gradually changed. Popular prejudices, however, were retained for the most part, as history slowly turned into romance. Chroniclers were not fond of lost causes and minority verdicts survive only by accident (Galbraith 1945:126).

The intellectual developments of the time had a profound effect on the chroniclers' verdict on King William. The conservatism of monastic institutions, and hence of their chroniclers, was in part due to their being the product of a much earlier and more primitive age. Primitive societies are generally conformist, in the sense that they are not aware of alternative patterns of conduct (Morris 1972:121), and while great upheavals both intellectual and social, were taking place from the mid-eleventh century onwards, the monasteries remained out of the mainstream of these developments. William II, on the other hand, was in some important respects a product of the new age, certainly to a much greater extent than were his biographers. In the changing climate of opinion, men increasingly found that there was no ethical certainty. Realizing that values so often conflicted, they were forced to make their own decisions and to question established codes of conduct (Morris 1972:122, 160, 166). We can discern such forces at work even in Eadmer's biased account of the confrontation between king and archbishop. The new uncertainty was increasingly expressed in satire (Morris 1972:122), which again we can glimpse in the king's conversations as Eadmer reports them. Eadmer himself may not have recognized when the king was speaking ironically, but it was no part of his purpose to understand, let alone to represent, the king's viewpoint. William was ahead of his time in having lost, or abandoned, all but the most fundamental of a received set of values (Southern 1966:145–6), a spiritual phenomenon more common in the mid-twelfth century, but his circumstances largely account for this. Although the rival ecclesiastical hierarchy was not yet the excessively bureaucratic corporation attacked by the Goliard poets (Morris 1972:130), it was well on the way to becoming so, and there was already an increasing divergence between the pretensions and the practices of the saeculorum. William, well aware of the needs of the regnum, which itself was very much a
product of his own times, saw no reason to
pay lip service to the increasingly strident
claims of the rival power. With his own
grasp of the realities of political life, he
recognized that the simpler codes of the past
were inadequate, and, like others, developed
his own abilities to evaluate, to criticize, and
to take the initiative. Like others caught up
in the whirlwind of changing and incom-
patible values, he expressed his inner con-
The chroniclers deplored the symptom, but
in their limited experience, were ignorant of
the cause. We can see reflected in the king
not only the spiritual developments of his
own times, but also the resolution and
radicalism which marks out the leader in any
age, and the pessimistic determination of the
isolated individual which was a legacy com-
mon to the Germanic peoples (Alexander

Individualism was not welcomed by the
ecclesiastical establishment, which saw it as a
threat to its own spiritual and intellectual
monopoly, and this in turn is an added ex-
planation of the chroniclers' reaction to
William II. The king was certainly no lone
radical voice in his realm. People do not
develop ideas in a complete intellec-
tual vacuum. As an instance, and one need not
postulate any direct contact, the Anonymous
of York was at least a precocious student
during William's reign. The king's public
image might have been very different if the
Anonymous had published his revolutionary
exposition of the regnum's claims rather
clearly than he did (Tellenbach 1959: 146).
Instead, he gave respectability to Henry I's
church policy, which was simply William's
wit large (Howell 1962: 29).

The chroniclers reflect the opposite side
of the new intellectual movements. Although
they were more static in their out-
look, yet they reflected the current unease
and saw their own age as a time of troubles.
There was a tendency to expect the im-
iminent arrival of Antichrist (Morris 1972: 145),
and while it would be unfair to say that any
of the Anglo-Norman chroniclers con-
siously identified him with William, yet
they portrayed the king so crudely as to
leave an already impressionable audience
with that assumption. Again, in the chron-
icles, we see a reflection of the increasing
interest in psychology (that which dis-
tinguishes each individual from every other)
and the personal portrait (Morris 1972: 158).
A distinctive and outspoken subject such as
William II tempted writers to show off their
budding literary skills, so that their end pro-
duct is just as much a fictional villain as the
thirteenth-century chroniclers made of King
John (Galbraith 1944: throughout).

The clerical world was becoming
increasingly verbose and artificial when it
put pen to parchment, and in contrast the
king's alleged sayings - for medieval writers
used direct speech to indicate attitudes,
rather than verbatim conversations (Smalley
1974: 19) - appear all the more abrasive. His
reported quips suggest both that he enjoyed
shocking earnest clerical note-takers, and
that they in turn secretly enjoyed being
shocked (Brooke 1963: 167–8). Moreover,
the audience for which they wrote expected
to be entertained (Smalley 1974: 13). Wil-
liam's biographers certainly achieved this
cut although the picture of the king which
they transmitted to the next generation
doubtedly owed as much to their tone of
voice and caustic asides during readings to
the chapter as did their actual text.
As we know all too well today, an individual's public image depends entirely on its reflection, or distortion, in the news media, where the most unlikely people acquire haloes, or horns and tail. Such distortion is even more likely in the case of historical figures, since there is less chance of a counter-image being presented, for we are normally dependent on a diminishing number of first-hand sources the further back in time a person lived. When reading modern political biography, we are amused at the different emphasis which two or three men give to the same trivial episode - let alone to major political decisions. Much more care is needed to vet the bias of medieval chroniclers. No writers who played a major part in the English historical tradition were strict contemporaries of Eadmer. We have no account of William II’s reign which is equally authoritative, let alone one which narrates events from a contrasting viewpoint, so that the problem of evaluating the king’s achievements is all the greater. His character, so far as we can see, had much in common with that of his contemporary, Bohemond of Taranto. Unfortunately for William’s reputation, he had no Anna Comnena to work out her love-hate fascination in purple prose (Sewter 1969:14), and no ghost-writer to revamp a Gesta Willelmi as was done for Bohemond with the Gesta Francorum (Hill 1962:x, xxxvii-viii). Both men, in their enterprise and irony, resembled their Viking ancestors of six or seven generations earlier, but we see them through the eyes not only of different civilizations, but also of writers with very different prejudices. Anna at her most vehement still had a healthy respect for Bohemond’s political acumen. To Eadmer, the very concept was alien (Southern 1966:302).

The members of the society in which William matured saw themselves, in the words of Bernard of Chartres, as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants - able to see further than, but owing most of their achievement to, those who lifted them up (Brooke 1955:xli). The king’s policies were in essence those of his father, but in several respects, particularly in the expansion of his frontiers, his own abilities and ambitions drove him on, while in others, notably in his dealings with the sacerdotium, he was driven to extremes by the intransigence of his opponents.

William I and William II had a ready-made base for their programme of strong government in the achievements of their tenth- and eleventh-century English predecessors, who bequeathed them a unified kingdom and a legal and financial apparatus which, although rudimentary, had great potential (Campbell 1975:39-54). William II governed the country more thoroughly than previous rulers had found possible, and paved the way for the more publicized efforts of his brother along the same lines, yet he himself earned nothing but abuse for his achievement. Ground gained for the monarchy was ground lost for other interests, hence the sense of outrage which is reflected in the chroniclers. Henry I’s subjects - and chroniclers - had come to accept that the clock could not be put back.

Even hostile accounts of the reign admit among its major successes the strengthening of the northern frontier. Natives of Northumbria and Cumbria owe their undisputed English nationality to William II. Of course he himself owed something to his father’s efforts in the same direction, and also to the fact that Malcolm Canmore repeatedly played into his hands, but Wil-
liau deserves the credit for establishing the border with Scotland virtually as it runs today, as well as for reinforcing earlier tentative claims to overlordship of the Scottish kingdom (Duncan 1975:120–1; Barrow 1966:25). His stabilization of the West March (Duncan 1975:120; Barrow 1966:28) by planting colonists in the neighbourhood of his new castle of Carlisle was later copied by Henry I in Pembrokeshire (Darlington 1968:xxx), but it is usually Henry, not William, who is commended for his imaginative frontier policy. Judicial help for Edgar Aetheling and his royal nephews gave political backing to William’s military gains, and prepared the way for the more explicit alliance of the next reign (Duncan 1975:125–6, 217). Henry I is properly commended for his statesmanship in contracting a marriage with the Anglo-Scottish princess (Edith) Matilda, but he carried out a plan earlier formed by William II on his own account (Grimwell Milne 1968:112). Herman, abbot of Tomhair, heard from Anselm that William visited the princess at her aunt’s convent, but finding her veiled as a nun, he left without further conversation. Anselm, a consummate politician (Vaughn 1975:279–305), certainly grasped the implications of this visit, which he mentioned to Herman when recounting his conversation with Matilda about allegations that she was a nun. Her explanation cleared the way for her marriage to Henry I (MPL 159:427–30), but once the event took place, it was no longer tactful to speak of earlier offers for her hand.

The Norman drive into Wales was carried on largely by private enterprise, on a piecemeal basis (Edwards 1956:168), but William himself led the recovery of ground lost in the south during the revolt of 1094. A national enterprise called for a national effort by all tenants-in-chief, including the ecclesiastics, and the king was justifiably annoyed when Anselm’s ill-equipped contingent failed to meet the minimal requirements (Stenton 1961:148). It is possible to discount Stenton’s hypothesis that Anselm’s contingent comprised anachronistic English drongs (Southern 1966:159) without necessarily concluding that the king’s complaint was spurious. The archbishop was cager enough to claim jurisdiction over the Welsh clergy (Richter 1973:lixxvii–viii) but this could only be truly effective as a follow-up to military victory. It was disingenuous of his biographer to represent the king’s complaint as an unjustified attack on an innocent victim who was totally above such mundane concerns. This was only one of several episodes involving the king and the archbishop which Eadmer recorded tendentiously, to say the least (Southern 1966:157–8; compare Southern 1962:67). Similarly Anselm, in resisting royal demands for a contribution, commensurate with the resources of his temporalities, towards the king’s Norman campaign of 1094, was actually more concerned not to acquire a reputation for simony than to meet his obligations as a tenant-in-chief. Eadmer naturally implied that the failure of this campaign was due to the king’s harassment of the archbishop (Vaughn 1975:287).

William’s recovery of Normandy was welcome to his clerical magnates as well as to his lay barons, for both had a vested interest in the unity of kingdom and duchy, and it was certainly the wish of William I that his most loyal son should rule over both (Le Patourel 1971:5, 8–9). The achievement of William II was due equally to military skill and to recognition of a good bargain when
It was put to him by the papal legate Haskins 1918:78–9; Le Patourel 1971:5). His rule was consolidated by government far superior to his elder brother’s (Haskins 1918:80), coupled with quick thinking and fast footwork in subsequent emergencies (Freeman 1882b:282–4; 645–52). William revived his father’s governance of Normandy as rex Anglorum, in place of Robert’s weak ducal rule as a vassal of the French Crown. William’s treatment of England and Normandy as a united, independent regnum was yet another of his policies later followed by Henry I (Hollister, 1976:213–14, 216–17), which effectively predetermined developments in the twelfth century and beyond, both in the government of England and the duchy, and in the pattern of international relations.

The king’s ambitions apparently did not stop at rounding off the family lands, for he reputedly had designs on Ireland, Poitou (Brewer 1891:290; Stubbs 1880:379), and even France itself (Hollister 1973:615). When Henry II had ideas along the same lines, he was admired for his enterprise, whereas William’s hostile chroniclers moralized about pride coming before a fall (Brewer 1891:290; Stubbs 1889:379). Laymen, who wrote political history only under exceptional circumstances (Hill 1962:xiv), held ambition in great respect, as

Figure 1. Portrait coin of William II
their Viking ancestors had done. Many of the First Crusaders, including William’s
tiresome uncle Odo, were at least as concerned
with their temporal as with their
spiritual welfare (Bates 1975: 1–20). In fact,
all William’s family had their full share of
the urge to achieve fame and fortune —
usually at one another’s expense. The
disparagement of William’s ambitions by
the chroniclers of Henry’s reign is the more
noticeable in that these same men were only
too willing to praise the military and
political achievements of Norman rulers in

The chroniclers emphasize that the king
was able to rely on his English subjects when
his Norman barons gave trouble (Stibbs
1889: 361; Chibnall 1973: 135). Contrary to
popular belief, this does not necessarily
mean that the English were deluded by
promises made to them early in the reign. More
to the point, they were entirely lacking in
leaders of their own race, most of whom
had died at Hastings or in subsequent rebellions in William I’s reign; many others had
entered the service of the Byzantine emperor
(Shepard 1973: 53–92), while those who
remained had been drastically denuded on
the economic scale, and hence in political
and military potential. The only possibility
was Edgar Atheling, who lacked any real
backing in England, and could usually be
persuaded that his interests lay elsewhere —
in Scotland, for instance, where his energies
might be turned to William’s advantage
(Duncan 1975: 129) or on the crusade (Hill

The English had become used to a
cohesive state, already well on the way to
centralization (Campbell 1975: 59–61). If
they supported rebels against the king, they
themselves would be discarded once they
had served their purpose. A rebellion would
in any case lead to feudal anarchy, when
they would lose whatever they had managed
to save from the Norman Conquest. Such
reasoning accounts also for their willingness
to serve overseas, for they could grasp as
well as the king’s Norman subjects that there
could be civil order only when the kingdom
and the duchy were in the same hands.

These considerations do not mean that
the king deliberately ignored the susceptibilities of his English subjects. Westminster’s place as the future administrative
capital of England was effectively deter-
mined when William II rebuilt its great hall
the hub of Edward the Confessor’s palace.
In doing so, he gained a centre of govern-
ment more convenient than Winchester,
while at the same time stressing the con-
tinuity of his rule with that of his English
predecessors. The king’s co-operation with
Alvin Child in the foundation of Ber-
mondsey Priory was perhaps a recognition
on his part of the support given him by
Englishmen in the rebellion of 1088 (Brooke
and Keen 1975: 81, 312–13). During his reign
Englishmen were occasionally admitted to
positions of influence. Peterborough Abbey,
for instance, was allowed to line for licence
to elect an English abbot, following the dis-
astrous rule of a Norman (Southern
1970: 192). Three generations later, it was
said to be impossible to distinguish between
English freemen and Normans (Johnson
1950: 55). If so, this was in part at least due to
William II’s treating his subjects as one
nation.

The Jews were first introduced into Eng-
lend by William I, who appreciated the
stimulus to the Norman economy which
derived from their small colony in Rouen. William II protected and encouraged his Jewish subjects both in England and in Normandy, since their transactions helped finance his mercenary contingents (Brooke and Keir 1975:179, 223-4). Like his successors, he strongly discouraged his Jewish subjects from converting to Christianity. The reason was not, as the chroniclers hinted, primarily due to religious scepticism on his part (Rule 11884:99-101). The most conventional kings discouraged conversion down to the 1250s, when the Jews were beginning to outline their usefulness to the English economy, for it was appreciated that they could only practise usury so long as they were Jews. They could not be permitted to assimilate with the gentle population even if they wanted to, since their credit facilities were so much in demand.2 In William's time, society was not yet sophisticated enough to admit, openly at any rate, the alternative of Christian moneylenders such as William Cade or the Cahorsins.

In William II's reign much of the ground work was prepared for the more publicized development of the legal system, and in particular the expansion of royal justice in the regions, which occurred during the reign of Henry I, who was certainly not working in a vacuum. Under William II the office of local justiciar clearly developed out of very tentative precedents in the previous reign (Cotme 1957:8-20, 24, 28, 31). In his time too, royal justice was increasingly administered through the shire courts, which were used so much more often than before that their activities were felt as a burden (Southern 1933:105). Two teams of itinerant justices, commissioned ad investiganda regia planta, were also sent out in William's reign, anticipating the better-known eres of Henry I's time (Southern 1933:105). Despite their limitations (Reedy 1966:92), their long-term significance was considerable. Effective royal justice throughout the land was essential if there was to be a unified kingdom. The origins of the judicial processes of writ of right, praecipe and novel disseisin, can be traced in William's writs, and it now became regular practice to impose a staggering fine on those who disregarded orders conveyed by writ (Southern 1970:189). The legal and financial developments of William's reign prepared the way for the work of the Exchequer in the twelfth century, and perhaps even initiated it (Southern 1933:111). Royal control over the resources of the realm was extended by the introduction of the abacus into the treasury. This had great potential for assessing shire revenues, as a contemporary treatise demonstrated (Haskins 1924:328-35), and its impact on the exploitation of the national revenues was the equivalent of the adoption of computers in modern times. An increasing proportion of the national wealth came from towns, which were now entering a long period of expansion. William appreciated that civil order and stable urban communities enhanced his own position (Brooke and Keir 1975:31), but if towns were to prosper through trade, then England needed the reputation of a country in which foreign merchants could do business without hindrance, an attitude instanced by his extension of royal justice on generous terms to Scandinavian traders (Chibnall 1973:281).

The furtherance of royal power was largely entrusted to a picked group of clerks and lay officers of comparatively obscure origin, who were administrators, but not policy
advisors on a par with the great tenants in chief. The team included Robert Bloett, Urse d'Abetot and, pre-eminently, Ranulf Flambard (West 1966:11-13), the subsidiary villain in popular mythology relating to this reign. Just as William II is commonly referred to by a nickname which was rendered derogatory only by the pen of E. A. Freeman (Grinnell-Milne 1968:39), so Ranulf the king's clerk, the exactor or executor of the king's will, is usually known by a pseudonym which bears no relationship to the real status or personality of the man who, from 1099 onwards, was the mighty palatine bishop of Durham (Southern 1933:98, 100, 125; Scammell 1966:452-4). The massive solidity of its Norman cathedral reflects the status of its occupant. Tenure of the bishopric in the twelfth century was synonymous with command of the Scottish March (Scammell 1966:453). Ranulf, with his great organizing ability and cool head, even when his own life was at stake (Southern 1970:187), was just the man for this role. What is perhaps more surprising, in view of his popular reputation, is that the Durham monks commemorated his acts performed as their bishop (Southern 1970:202-4).

The cognomen Flambard, 'the darting flame', was coined for Ranulf by Robert Dispenser, a fellow-canonic and brother of Ranulf's colleague Urse d'Abetot, in token that he was here there and everywhere (Chibnall 1973:11), whether on judicial visitations, financial quests or executing routine business. The chroniclers were fascinated by his ubiquity, and by the novelty of his position, a national life. Extended royal government naturally made increasing demands on men's pockets, hence the chroniclers' representation of Ranulf and his colleagues as nothing more than a pack of licensed robbers. In reality, they were extending the king's power so that he was now no longer merely head of the feudal pyramid, but ruler of an increasingly centralized state (Southern 1970:186-8), far more disciplined than Normandy was - if only in popular memory, once William gained control of the duchy. The activities of the team of administrators, rather than those of Ranulf as an individual, anticipated in some important respects the scope delegated to the justiciar in the twelfth century (West 1966:11).

These men naturally expected to be rewarded for services rendered. Much has been made of Henry I's exploitation of patronage as a means of encouraging his subordinates to strengthen his own position (Southern 1970:206-33), but in fact this was no innovation in his time - a difference in degree, perhaps, as the team was enlarged, but not a difference in kind. The concept of the king as the ring-giver, bestowing gifts on his loyal men, goes back to Beowulf and beyond (Wright 1957:28, 35, 51). Henry I's supposed inspiration is simply due to the fact that his reign is much better documented than those of his predecessors. In William II's reign, as in earlier times, quid pro quo grants left little or no trace, for the recipients usually failed to preserve the rare confirmatory charters which they received, whereas that much-misinterpreted document, the 1130 Pipe Roll, makes it appear that Henry I was the first king to play effectively on his servants' greed and ambition to further his own ends. William's men would have been astonished at the suggestion that they were in the king's service for any other
reason than good old-fashioned self-interest. Robert Bloett ended his days as bishop of Lincoln, Ranulf Flambard as palatine bishop of Durham, while Urse d'Abicot was granted lands and delegated royal powers in the west Midlands which formed the basis of his Beauchamp descendants' virtual state-within-a-state. William's highly motivated team of administrators was so efficient that it was taken over en bloc by Henry I. Ranulf Flambard, of course, had to be made a scapegoat for propaganda purposes, but he soon reappeared at court, now no longer an energetic royal clerk on the make, but a great tenant in chief and weighty political advisor (Southern 1933: 117: 124-5).

In his judicious patronage of the great tenants in chief, too, William II compares favourably with the supposedly more statesmanlike Henry I. Valuable support in a crisis was generously rewarded - at no cost to the king himself - by the creation of the earldom of Warwick for Henry of Newburgh (Stevenson 1858:21, 137; Doubleday 1904:277-8, 310-25, 332-5; Hall 1965:325). The Montgomery brothers were rendering useful service in extending the king's frontiers, but would turn dangerous if their ambitions were thwarted. They were given most of what they asked for - but at a price (Mason 1963:15-20). The lands of rebels must of course be confiscated, but the king saw no need to alienate a whole powerful clan by dismembering an escheated honour, as Henry I was later to do. Let the next brother step into theLady Lorine of Wlobley, for instance, and he would remain safe, if only to keep his windsall (Wigham 1966:172-3). Royal government could be extended so long as baronial estates were left intact. It did not do to push mighty subjects too hard. Henry I ignored this precept, and held his people down by fear, which was all very well for him, but his dismemberment of so many honours was a major contribution to the troubles of his successor (Davis 1964:1-12).

William II's policy towards the Church has frequently been attacked, but our only records of it are those made by churchmen. He was, moreover, fighting a revolution on the part of the sacerdotium, and could not afford to be over-nice in his methods. He knew as well as anyone that Anselm, far from acting out his self-styled role as an old and feeble sheep yoked to an untamed bull, was already a past master at ecclesiastical politics before he became archbishop, and thoroughly understood what he must do to further the claims of the sacerdotium in England (Vaughn 1975:279-95). Anselm was perfectly sincere in his beliefs, but totally oblivious of the outcome for secular government if he succeeded (Southern 1966:162, 302). Throughout the reign, he repeatedly pressed for church reform at times of political crisis. He usually brought pressure on the king only when he had public sympathy and when William needed his support for his projects. Confronted by what Anselm euphemistically called 'holy guile', the king had other words for it, and it is not surprising that he was driven to express publicly his hatred of the archbishop (Vaughn 1975:288, 293).

William was just as entitled to uphold his own sacred trust - the authority of the secular monarchy as he had received it from his father (Southern 1962:84-5), and he came well out of the battle. His only concession was to acknowledge a pope whom,
even before the conflict with Anselm, he had already realized he must eventually recognize (Southern 1966:154-5). During William's reign, Anselm could not make headway on the scale he achieved in Henry I's time (Vaughn 1975:293). William's bishops did not in general accept Anselm's cause as their own. At most we discern one hesitant Gregorian in Herbert Losinga, for William of St Calais's cynical rejection of secular jurisdiction can be discounted, as Lanfranc himself pointed out. At the council of Rockingham, the bishops stood firmly by the king (Arnold 1882:179-80), as might be expected of royal servants at the peak of the career-ladder (Southern 1966:146). With their training, they appreciated as well as the king and his lay barons that Anselm's claims on behalf of the *sacerdotium* encroached on the royal sovereignty, and they were equally indignant (Vaughn 1975:286, 289, 292). Besides, they were also determined to preserve their own authority, for the stronger the pope's jurisdiction became, the weaker their own position. Throughout William's reign, the bishops' authority was largely safeguarded by his own attitude towards the papacy, but their status perceptibly diminished over the next fifty years as the jurisdiction of the papal court widened (Brooke 1955:xxxi, nos. 168 74, 85, 91). For Anselm, there were different considerations. He had secured his election by adroitly building up a network of influence, and once installed, made it his business to subdue the other British bishops to his obedience (Vaughn 1975:285, 288), while the king's successful resistance to the activities of the papal legates meant that Anselm himself did not become a mere cog in a wheel. In the upshot, William maintained his right to take the homage of his ecclesiastical tenants in chief, and his right to invest them with staff and ring. It was accident, not principle, which resulted in Anselm's not receiving investiture at the king's hands. William has often been charged with a tactical mistake in appointing him to Canterbury in the first place, but the choice was essentially that of influential barons gathered at what was believed to be the king's death bed (Southern 1966:152 3). In the confusion, they imposed their own candidate and gained spiritual merit for the king. On neither count could they hesitate for fear of future consequences.

The king's enforcement of regalian right, his enjoyment of the revenues of a vacant benefice, agitated the chroniclers as much as did his quarrel with Anselm. The king certainly did not invent this right, as insular chroniclers implied, but he did develop tentative precedents into a highly profitable source of revenue (Howell 1962:10-12). Again, he was not breaking completely new ground by taking a feudal relief from tenants of the vacant see of Worcester. Rather, at a time when his military and diplomatic plans required a steadily mounting income, he was extending all feudal rights – over ecclesiastical as well as lay property (Howell 1962:19). Episcopal and monastic establishments were highly privileged corporations. They gained from the king's achievements, and could reasonably be expected to help finance them. The Canterbury monks grumbled at their treatment, but Canterbury was a special case. Other, more co-operative, houses which underwent vacancies were treated with consideration (Howell 1962:16, 19). Henry I, in his coronation charter, astutely played on the resentment aroused
by William's assertion of regalian right (Stubbbs 1966:117–19). He won clerical support by promising to abolish it, and then proceeded to exploit the right far more than his brother had ever done (Howell 1962:29). What the chroniclers do not say, is that William's approach towards clerical jurisdiction and property was followed by his successors, and that contemporary Continental practice had much in common with his. The assertion of regalian right had a second, and equally important role to play in William's furtherance of the royal power, since it involved the periodic intrusion of royal justice into franchises which normally owed no lord but bishop or abbot (Howell 1962:206). If England was to become a truly coherent state, then tenants of these substantial baronies must acknowledge that the king was the lord of their lord. In this respect, the assertion of regalian right was a fundamental component of William's policy of welding his realm together.

William II's policies appeared so shocking to contemporaries because they were new (Southern 1970:186–8). Later generations found royal government far more demanding, but by then people had come to expect that it would be. He was not appreciated because he stood at the dawn of a new era, which envisaged cohesion in place of contributualism. This threatened too many vested interests, and it is arguable that the activities of his administrators, and possibly the growth of factions among them, inadvertently created a nucleus of supporters for an alternative occupant of the throne (Southern 1933:117). If so, they would have done well to back the chivalrous but politically inept Duke Robert. In the event, Henry I reaped the benefit of William's policies. He lightly disguised them under a veneer of bureaucracy and custom, while implying that his brother's methods were a thing of the past. The conventional response to this, that Henry's government was acceptable and laudable because it was backed by legality and urbanity (themselves products of the twelfth century), would have been a black joke to those who suffered under his reign of calculated terror. By the time the true nature of Henry's government was clear — and that was not long in coming — the myth of the tyrant Rufus was too firmly established to eradicate.

The myth was enhanced by the deliberate spreading of rumours concerning premonitions of William's death, as though good men were forewarned that a bad king was about to meet his deserts (Grinnell-Milne 1968:55–7). Naturally all accounts of these premonitions were written after the king had in fact died. Most of these stories ultimately derive from Eadmer, and the one independent source for the rumours is Gloucester Abbey (Southern 1962:123n). Its abbot tried to speak to the king about a prophetic dream, but he brushed it aside as mere superstition. The abbot was possibly trying to hint that there was a plot against the king's life, but did not dare to be too explicit in public, since very important people were involved, some of whom were actually present (Grinnell-Milne 1968:57, 61).

The myth of Rufus was created immediately on the death of William II. There were three strands in its making. First, the writings of Eadmer, who from 1093 was composing a biography of Anselm. He was spokesmen both for his hero and for one of the greatest English monastic communities of the day (Southern 1966:229, 299, 329),
whose members were notoriously unscrupulous in defence of their interests (Southern 1958:193–226; Johnson 1961:xvi, 114–15), and he tells his story of the conflict between king and archbishop entirely from Anselm's point of view. His account of events in his Historia novorum is openly prejudiced, for he states in the preface that the chief nova res of his time was the resistance of the archbishop to royal authority over the Church. This clash of principle in church-state relations was essentially new, as Eadmer was the first writer to realize (Southern 1966:303–4, 310), but he ignored its implications for secular government.

The second contribution to the myth came from the monastic chroniclers of Henry I's reign, who accepted Henry as the good king whose coronation charter promised to sweep away the bad old days of his predecessor. Their facts are essentially those of Eadmer: their literary embellishments are their own work. The frequent tendency to treat the mid-twelfth-century chroniclers as corroborative of Eadmer ignores the elementary precaution of evaluating such evidence according to the vested interests of the house which produced the work, or those of the house from which a chronicle derived its source-material on earlier reigns. The works which derive from Eadmer reflect Canterbury's jaundiced view of William while they are dealing with the church-state controversy, but when they turn to secular matters, they admit, half grudgingly and half admiringly, that the king had exactly the talents required at that particular time—a judicious blend of severity, generosity and ebullience. Orderic, summing up of the king's flair for government would in fact serve equally well as an appraisal of Henry I (Chibnall 1973:179; Stubbs 1889:373), except that not even Henry's greatest admirers could call him dashing.

William was given less qualified appraisal by houses which remembered him as a benefactor. Battle Abbey, for instance, was founded by his father, who left its endowments in a precarious state. William II put Battle's finances onto a sounder footing, and the monks were duly appreciative (Brooke 1963:165), but their chronicle was not in the mainstream of the monastic historical tradition, and was virtually ignored by the professional historians of the nineteenth century, who gave the Rufus myth the form which has survived almost to the present (Galbraith 1945:127). The monks of Durham had a more ambivalent attitude towards William II. He was their patron, whom they could not criticize, but they noted that he treated other houses badly (Meehan 1975:53).

Writers who were able to take a detached view of William's policies are much more favourable than the closely inter-related monastic chroniclers. Suger, abbot of Saint Denis, was no cloistered historian, but chief minister of the king of France. His firm grasp of the realities of political life led him to recognize William's achievements, and it is here that we must look for their most objective appraisal in the twelfth century (Southern 1933:128; Prestwich 1954:27). Geoffrey Gaimar, a clerk of Caen, gave a glowing account of William's reign, but Geoffrey was essentially a writer of romance (Gransden 1975:372). The king's military skill and ebullient character made him an ideal hero for a work of this sort, but it is scarcely sober history. Neither Suger nor Geoffrey was drawn on to any extent by the nineteenth-century historians.

The third contribution to the myth came
from Henry I. Following his accession to the throne in dubious circumstances, he needed supporters, including the eminent clerics, and his unprecedented coronation charter largely promised to repudiate William’s treatment of the sacerdotium. To reinforce his position, however, he followed William’s practices, while fostering the myth of the repentant Rufus, to lead people to believe that these were things of the past. William said frankly that no ruler once firmly in power can carry out everything he promised while bidding for support (Rule 1884:25). Henry left his subjects to work that one out for themselves. By the time they did, they were in great awe of him, as the Peterborough chronicle reminds us, and his sheriffs kept a sharp lookout for those whose dawning realization led them to criticize the activities of the king or his procurator (Clark 1970:54, Kealey 1972:41).

Henry I’s reign was much better documented than William II’s, simply because in the twelfth century men were gradually becoming aware of the importance of making and keeping written records, and governmental practices which were already well established were now often recorded for the first time. Simultaneously, new developments in law and rhetoric were used to veil the true intent of royal policies from the populace, although royal clerks, such as the compiler of the Leges Henrici, commented bitterly on the real nature of the regime (Downer 1972:99). Henry II’s official records deliberately extolled the good old days of Henry I in order to make King Stephen’s reign a non-event in retrospect, and this encouraged the subsequent popular belief that Henry I was a good king interposed between two bad kings. Later chroniclers perpetuated this view, relying entirely on their predecessors, prejudices and all, for knowledge of events earlier than their own lifetimes. Throughout the middle ages in England, the sacerdotium fought a losing battle against the demands of the regnum. It was consoling for monastic communities to believe that kings did not have right on their side, and to depict this in verbal battles between a clerical champion and a bad king who came to a suitably bad end.

In the nineteenth century both the myth of Rufus the bad king and that of his brother Henry the good king were revived in the writings of Stubbs (1884:290–318) and Freeman (1882a: 1882b). They uncritically accepted the chroniclers’ caricature of William and, with no new evidence, enhanced it with invective of their own. The obsession of these Victorian writers, as much as of any monastic chronicler, was with moral judgments. They had no more idea of the realities of political life than had the monks whose diatribes they uncritically accepted. In the last resort, therefore, their judgment on William’s reign, as on others, was moral, and even religious (Galbraith 1943: 127, 131), yet was seriously accepted as a valid historical appraisal.

The opinion of Stubbs and the even more extreme views of Freeman were perpetuated until scholars began to examine the primary sources more critically. At the end of the nineteenth century, Round pointed out the most glaring fallacies in their interpretation of the reign (1895:226–8; Southern 1970:183–4), but the mythical view of it was perpetuated vigorously down to the 1950s despite remonstrances from Stenton, who broke new ground in his interpretation of feudal society (1961:148–9) and Galbraith, in his reappraisal of chronicles as historical sources (1945: 125, 127).
Most historians did not venture to reject the myth out of hand. As each advanced knowledge in one particular field, so William's stock went up in that respect, but the writer hastily added that of course nothing could be said in the king's favour on other counts.

The major aspects of William Rufus's reign have never been re-examined and put in their proper context. We have evidence of a king who furthered the policies of his able predecessor, made important advances of his own, and was forced to make no real concessions — something which can be said for very few of William's successors. His policies were assiduously followed by his brother and the stronger among their successors, yet his own achievements are rarely given more than grudging recognition. There is no longer any place in historical scholarship for those pantomime villains Rufus and Flambard, and their replacement in secondary literature by the resolute and forward-looking King William II and his astute minister Ranulf, bishop of Durham, is long overdue. No consideration should be given to an equally unrealistic attempt to whitewash their characters. Successful medieval kings and their servants were not 'nice people' in the vulgar sense of amiable and altruistic nonentities. The rare exceptions were totally unsuited for the positions they occupied, and caused more suffering by their ineptitude than did the hard-headed majority. As Orderic Vitalis said, the Normans were a warlike people, and needed a firm hand to control them (Chibnall 1973:82). Medieval society was turbulent, and presented many problems, of elementary civil order and national defence, to name only the most obvious, which we are largely spared today. Recognition is due to those who met them head on, but is not always given, such is the tenacity of myth.

Notes

1. Conversely, the unorthodox private life of a popular hero such as Richard I would be played down by the chroniclers.
2. Richardson 1955 268-9; Rigg 1902:87. I am grateful to Mrs Sharon Lieberman for these references.
3. Mason forthcoming: the extent of Beauchamp control over Worcestershire is discussed at length in the introduction to this volume.
4. Brooke 1963:170-1; Grimnell-Milne 1968; but compare Hollister 1973, 637-53. Most writers on the period believe that William II was murdered, either on the orders of his brother or by discontents who supposed that their interests would be better served with Henry on the throne, although Professor Hollister maintains that the king's death was simply due to a hunting accident. In either case, potential supporters must be persuaded that Henry had more to offer than Robert.
5. Honourable exceptions include Howell 1962 and Southern 1933 and 1970 and, in a more general work, Barlow 1955

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